Social representations and the development of knowledge

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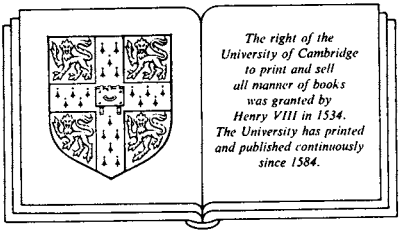

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1990

Printed in Great Britain at the
University Press, Cambridge

British Library cataloguing in publication data
Social representations and the development of knowledge.
1. Children. Development
I. Duveen, Gerard II. Lloyd, Barbara
155.4

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data
Social representations and the development of knowledge/edited by
Gerard Duveen and Barbara Lloyd.
p. cm.
Based on papers from a symposium which was held at the 1987
Annual Conference at the British Psychological Society.
Includes indexes.
ISBN 0 521 36368 3
1. Social perception in children – Congresses. 2. Social
perception – Congresses. 3. Social role – Congresses. I. Duveen,
Gerard. II. Lloyd, Barbara B. (Barbara Bloom), 1933– .
III. British Psychological Society. Conference (1987: Brighton,
England)
BF723.S6S66 1990
155.4′ 18 – dc20 89–33178 CIP

ISBN 0 521 36368 3

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Introduction

Gerard Duveen and Barbara Lloyd

Social representations as a perspective in social psychology

The concept of social representations introduced into social psychology by Moscovici and his collaborators has had a chequered reception in the English-speaking world. It is in *La Psychanalyse, son image et son public* that Moscovici (1976a) elaborated the concept of social representation most fully, both theoretically and empirically. In the absence of a translation, even Moscovici's own English presentations of the concept have an abstract, general or programmatic character, since they introduce a theoretical perspective without the benefit of a clear demonstration of its value for empirical research (see Moscovici, 1973, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1988; Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983).

In calling the first chapter of his book 'Social representation: a lost concept' Moscovici implies that social psychology has become disengaged from a concern with the situation of psychological processes in social life. The concept of social representation is intended to restore to social psychology an awareness of the social by providing the means for comprehending social life from a psychological perspective. Such a perspective is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the influence of social relations on psychological processes.

Moscovici defines social representations as

> system(s) of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.
> (*Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii*)

This definition establishes social representations as particular kinds of structures which function to provide collectivities with intersubjectively shared means for understanding and communicating. As well as referring to social representations as structures in this way, Moscovici also uses the term to designate the process through which such structures are constructed and transformed. (If the English language were more flexible one could refer to this process as *social representing*, but to avoid such solecisms we shall use the singular form without an article to refer to social representation as process, and the singular with an article or the plural to refer to a social representation or social representations as structures.) As process, social representation is not bound by the canons of logical discourse, nor is it regulated by procedures of empirical verification or falsification. Rather, social representation is construed as being composed of two complementary functions, anchoring (whereby the unfamiliar or remote is absorbed into the familiar categories of everyday cognition) and objectification (whereby representations are projected into the world, so that what was abstract is transformed into something concrete). These two functions are interdependent, in the sense that a representation can become securely anchored to the extent that it is also objectified, and *vice versa*, that objectification would be impossible unless a representation were anchored. Nevertheless, they can be analytically distinguished as two moments in the process of social representation.

Moscovici's conceptualisation of the process of social representation is related to his distinction between the consensual universe of social representations and the reified universe of scientific discourse which respects the laws of logic and whose products are open to empirical investigation (1981). His purpose in making this distinction is not to propose a particular philosophy of science, but to point to a central phenomenon of our own society whereby the category of scientific understanding is distinguished from the category of everyday or common-sense understanding. What is proposed, then, is that these two universes, the reified and the consensual, correspond to a particular social representation in which the realm of the scientific is distinguished from that of common sense. The distinction is, nevertheless, a powerful one, as Moscovici notes. Science 'attempts to construct a map of the forces, objects and events unaffected by our desires and consciousness. [Social representation] stimulates and shapes our collective consciousness, explaining things and events so as to be accessible to each of us and relevant to our immediate concerns' (Moscovici, 1981, p. 187). Social psychology, in this view, is concerned with the analysis of the consensual universe, for which the theory of social representations provides the conceptual apparatus.

Social representations thus provide the central, integrative concept for a distinct perspective on social psychology, a perspective which is not an

entirely new departure but one which recovers and enriches traditions which had become marginalised in the discipline. It shares with both Piagetian theory and other constructivist trends in psychology and the social sciences an epistemological basis in treating the subject and object of knowledge as correlative and co-constitutive and rejecting the view that these terms designate independent entities. The ontological corollary to this position is that social representations are constitutive of the realities represented, a constitution (or construction) effected through anchoring and objectification. Thus the *content* of what is constructed is accorded the same significance as the process of construction, and hence Moscovici's dictum that social representations are always the representation of *something* (Moscovici, 1976a, 1984).

In this respect the theory of social representations is not a psychology of cognitions about social life, but rather a theory in which psychological activities are located in social life. Indeed, social representations can be contrasted with social psychological theories based on narrower definitions of psychological activity focussed on notions of attitudes or attribution. In such theories social cognition is viewed as cognitive processes in relation to social stimuli, but these 'social stimuli' are taken as given, since social life itself remains untheorised. The effect of this theoretical lacuna is to present a view of social cognition as the activity of individual minds confronting the social world. For social representations, on the other hand, attitudes and attributions arise as consequences of participation in social life; they form, as it were, the visible tip of an iceberg whose submerged portion comprises the very structures which enable the subject to construct meaningful attitudes and attributions. As Moscovici notes, the concept of social representations may be difficult to grasp because it occupies a 'mixed position, at the crossroads of a series of sociological concepts and a series of psychological concepts' (1976a, p. 39). The focus for this perspective is the systems of social representations through which groups construct an understanding, or theorise, social life. Thus as well as being always the representation of something, social representations are also always representations of *someone or some collective* (for example, Moscovici, 1976a, 1984). The inter-dependence between social representations and the collectives for which they function means that social life is always considered as a construction, rather than being taken as a given.

The duality of social representations in constructing both the realities of social life and an understanding of it recalls a similar duality in Piaget's conceptualisation of operational structures. Piaget's task was facilitated by the availability of a knowledge of physics, mathematics and logic. These sciences describe a reified universe which provided him with a perspective

from which it was possible to understand and interpret the behaviours of subjects at different levels of development. Without access to the logic of class inclusion it would have been difficult for him to have understood the attempts of children to answer the question whether there were more flowers or more roses in a given collection.

In the consensual universe of social life there is no privileged vantage point which offers an objective perspective from which to orient any investigation. In some circumstances it is possible for investigations of social representations to locate a point of reference comparable to the 'objectified' perspective available to Piaget. Moscovici's (1976a) study of psychoanalysis, for instance, takes the body of psychoanalytic theory originating in the work of Freud as an objectified point of reference from which to compare and contrast the social representations of psychoanalysis constructed by different social groups. He was able to observe the transformation of this body of knowledge as it was reconstituted in the network of representations held by the different groups. Again, without access to the corpus of psychoanalytic theory it would be difficult to understand and interpret the responses of members of different social groups to questions about psychoanalysis.

The study of social representations of psychoanalysis is an example of the way in which the reified universe of science is represented in the consensual world of everyday understanding. But not every social representation originates as a body of knowledge in the reified universe of scientific discourse. Indeed, most of the studies presented in this book concern social representations of themes drawn from within the realm of the consensual universe. In dealing with themes such as gender or the emotions a primary task for the investigators is to locate a perspective from which to organise the investigation. In some of the chapters the investigators have been able to use a knowledge of the social representations among adults as a point of reference for analysing the development of these representations through childhood. This is the case, for example, in the chapters by Lloyd and Duveen on gender, Corsaro on rules of social interaction and Semin and Papadopoulou on reflexive emotions. But in other cases the perspective from which to organise an investigation is more difficult to locate. In the studies of social representations of childhood by D'Alessio and by Emiliani and Molinari, for instance, no specific social group provides a fixed point of orientation. These studies resolve the issue by focussing on the object, childhood, and comparing the ways in which different groups represent this object. Similarly, both Carugati's study of the social construction of intelligence and De Paolis' analysis of social representations of psychology illustrate this perspective focussed on the object.

The issue outlined here is methodological in the sense that it concerns the relation of an epistemological position to empirical investigation. It is a strategic problem for research on social representations rather than a question of specific techniques. In each case the researcher has to proceed by identifying what Lucien Goldmann describes as a *significant structure* (Goldmann, 1976, 1980), by which he means a structure which has a functional necessity for a particular group. Social representations as significant structures identify both the group which constructs a representation and the content which is represented. The notion of social representations as significant structures also helps to distinguish this theory from other recent attempts to construct theories concerning the social psychological analysis of social life in terms of ordinary explanations (Antaki, 1981), linguistic repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) or rhetoric (Billig, 1987). What all of these approaches share is that they identify particular processes independently of any specific content, so that, again, the particular characteristics of specific aspects of social life remain outside the theory. While certain forms of ordinary explanation or particular linguistic repertoires or rhetorical devices all describe identifiable features of social discourse, these are also all features of the discourses of particular groups about specific aspects of social life, and thus draw on underlying social representations. Although they may provide useful analytical tools for investigating social representations, without explicating their implicit references to social representations, the analysis of these features of discourse cannot describe the social-psychological representation of social life. These features describe formal structures which it is difficult to locate in concrete social-psychological terms bound to some particular content. In this sense it can be said that these features do not constitute significant structures.

Social representations as a genetic theory

A genetic perspective is implied in the conception of social representations, in the sense that the structure of any particular social representation is a construction and thus the outcome of some developmental process. The works of Piaget and Goldmann again offer a comparable point of view. Both of these authors insisted on describing their approach as a *genetic* structuralism in which a structure is always viewed as a particular moment in development. A structure is the relatively enduring organisation of a function, while the realisation of a function implies its organisation in a structure. For similar reasons the theoretical perspective of social representations can be described as a *genetic social psychology*. Even if social

representations as structures do not meet the strict formal criteria proposed by Piaget (1971), they nonetheless constitute organised wholes with the specific function of making communication and understanding possible.

Conceived in this way the concept of social representation appears to have a general application as a means of comprehending the way in which socio-epistemic structures exercise a psychological influence. But to grasp the complexities subsumed in this concept it is useful to distinguish three types of transformations associated with social representation. There are processes of *sociogenesis*, which concerns the construction and transformation of the social representations of social groups about specific objects, *ontogenesis*, which concerns the development of individuals in relation to social representations, and *microgenesis*, which concerns the evocation of social representations in social interaction.

Sociogenesis

Sociogenesis is the process through which social representations are generated. Moscovici's (1976a) study of psychoanalysis is an example of the diffusion of scientific knowledge through the community as it is reconstructed by different social groups. But, as we noted above, it is not only knowledge originating in scientific discourses which gives rise to social representations: other themes also circulate in society through the medium of social representations. In recent years social representations of gender, for instance, have clearly been undergoing transformations, providing another example of a sociogenetic process. One chapter which clearly touches on issues of sociogenesis is De Paolis' comparisons of the social representations of psychology held both by psychologists and other professional groups working in the field of mental health.

Sociogenesis takes place in time, so that even when social representations are investigated at a particular moment in time, the resulting description needs to be viewed in a diachronic perspective. Moscovici's study, for instance, was originally published in 1961, and describes the structure of social representations of psychoanalysis at that time. Clearly the sociogenesis of these representations had taken place over the years since Freud's work began to appear. In the intervening years since Moscovici's study the theory of psychoanalysis has itself evolved and the characteristics of many social groups has also changed. A comparable study undertaken today might reveal transformations in the social representations of psychoanalysis. Sociogenesis thus also points to the historical dimension of social representations.

Ontogenesis

Human infants are born into a social world constructed in terms of the social representations of their parents, siblings, teachers, etc., representations which also structure the interactions of these others with the child. If, as Moscovici asserts, the society into which children are born is a 'thinking society', it is social representations which constitute the 'thinking environment' for the child. Developing the competence to participate as actors in this thinking society implies that children can acquire access to the social representations of their community. It is this process which we refer to as the ontogenesis of social representations, although ontogenesis as a process is not restricted to childhood, but occurs whenever individuals, children or adults, engage with novel social representations in order to participate in the life of a group.

An adequate account of ontogenesis needs to describe how social representations become psychologically active for individuals. Elsewhere (Duveen and Lloyd, 1986) we have suggested that ontogenesis is a process through which individuals re-construct social representations, and that in doing so they elaborate particular social identities. It is as social identities that social representations become psychologically active for individuals. Thus we can say that in expressing or asserting a social identity individuals draw on the resources made available through social representations. As this formulation implies, there is a distinction between social identities and social representations. Our own research on gender has shown that the same social representation can support distinct social identities. As we note in our chapter, in many respects boys and girls develop similar representations of gender, but they do not behave in similar ways.

The influence exercised by social representations on individuals can take different forms. Some social representations impose an imperative obligation on individuals to adopt a particular social identity. This is the case, for example, with representations of gender or ethnicity where individuals are constrained to construct the corresponding social identity. In such cases there is an external obligation which derives from the ways in which others identify an individual in terms of these social categories. In other instances the influence of social representations is exercised through a contractual obligation rather than an imperative one. In these cases an individual joining a social group contracts to adopt a particular social identity. Social representations of psychoanalysis provide an example of such a contractual obligation. As a body of knowledge psychoanalysis exercises no external obligation on individuals to interiorise the categories of analytic thinking as psychologically active constructions. But entry to some social groups (principally that of psychoanalysts themselves, but also other social groups

for whom an analytic perspective forms part of their world-view) is dependent upon individuals contracting to construe the world in terms of psychoanalytic categories.[1]

Microgenesis

A third genetic aspect of social representations is in social interaction, where individuals meet, talk, discuss, resolve conflicts – in short, communicate with one another. Social representations are evoked in all social interactions through the social identities asserted in the activity of individuals. Social identities, however, are not fixed attributes which individuals carry into each interaction and which remain invariant through the course of interaction. Rather, particular social identities are constructed through the course of social interaction, or through the successive encounters which make up the history of a particular interpersonal relation. There is a genetic process in all social interaction in which particular social identities and the social representations on which they are based are elaborated and negotiated. It is this process which we refer to as the microgenesis of social representations.

The evocation of social representations in social interaction occurs first of all in the ways in which individuals construct an understanding of the situation and locate themselves and their interlocutors as social subjects. In many circumstances, of course, there will be a mutuality in the understandings constructed by different participants which will obviate the need for any explicit specifications or negotiation of social identities, though one can still describe the course of such social interactions as the negotiation of social identities in the same sense as one speaks of a ship negotiating a channel. But where the mutuality of understanding cannot be taken for granted, or where an assumed mutuality breaks down, the negotiation of social identities becomes an explicit and identifiable feature of social interaction. In these circumstances the negotiation of social identities may involve the co-ordination of different points of view and the resolution of conflicts. In every social interaction there is a microgenetic process in which social identities are negotiated and shared frames of reference established, processes for which social representations provide the resources. Corsaro's chapter gives a vivid illustration of the microgenetic process and presents a view of ontogenetic and sociogenetic dimensions.

Language is, of course, a central medium through which social interactions are conducted, and recent studies in sociolinguistics have emphasised the construction of social identities in discourse (Gumperz, 1982) as well as the role of social representations (Rommetveit, 1974, 1984). Through the course

[1] We are grateful to Serge Moscovici for suggesting these particular terms, imperative and contractual obligations, to characterise this distinction.

of social interaction participants may come to adopt positions distinct from those with which they entered the interaction, and in this sense microgenesis is always a process of change. In many instances the changes which can be observed through the course of social interaction are transitory rather than structural as individuals adopt particular social identities in order to pursue specific goals or accomplish specific tasks. Yet social interaction is also the field in which social influence processes are most directly engaged (see Moscovici, 1976b), and in some instances the influences at work in social interaction may also lead to structural change in the representations of participants. These changes may be ontogenetic transformations in the development of social representations in individual subjects (see Doise and Mugny, 1984), but they may also be sociogenetic transformations resulting in the restructuration of social representations.[2]

Some examples may help to illustrate the possible relationships between these three types of genetic transformation of social representations. Consider first of all the scientist who proposes a new theory, and let us assume that we are dealing with an Einstein or a Freud proposing a radical new interpretation of the human situation or human experience. Through various forms of social interaction (publications or lectures) the scientist tries to communicate this theory to colleagues. The communication will have been successful to the extent that other scientists will have understood the concepts being proposed and also accepted that these concepts are well founded and not in error. The outcome will be ontogenetic transformations in the representations held by these scientists as individuals, as well as a sociogenetic transformation in the representation held by the scientific community as a social group.

By contrast, consider the developing child as they grasp some social representation of their community, gender or nationality, for example. For this development to occur the child needs to receive some communication, whether through interaction with other children or adults or from the public representations presented in the media. These microgenetic processes will have led to ontogenetic transformations in the child's representation of the world, but the social representations of their community are unlikely to be influenced by these particular microgenetic processes. In this case there is ontogenesis without sociogenesis, a state of affairs which is a characteristic feature of childhood given the negligible influence which children are able to exert on the representations held by their community.

In both of these examples ontogenesis and sociogenesis are the consequence of microgenetic processes. Indeed, microgenesis constitutes a motor, as it were, for the genetic transformations of social representations.

[2] Lucien Goldmann makes a similar point when he notes that there may be information which can be communicated to either groups or individuals only on condition of a transformation in their socio-psychological structures (Goldmann, 1976).

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